THE NEUROBIOLOGY OF SEXUAL ASSAULT

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The National Center for Victims of Crime is pleased to provide the slides used in our April 23, 2013 Webinar, “Sexual Assault Cold Case Survivors and the Neurobiology of Trauma.”

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Today’s Presentation

- The neurobiology of sexual assault
  - Introduction to neurobiology
  - During the assault: What are victims’ experiencing?

- Take home lessons for first responders
  - For current cases
  - For cold cases (i.e., victim notification)

- Q&A (as best we can!)
A Brief Intro to Neurobiology

“This Is Your Brain”
Brain Regions Impacted by Trauma

- Corpus callosum: A large band of nerve fibers through which information flows back and forth between the left and the right hemispheres of the brain.
- Basal ganglia: A control system for movement and cognitive functions.
- Thalamus: The relay station for most information going into the brain.
- Hypothalamus: Regulates sex hormones, blood pressure, and body temperature.
- Pituitary gland: The master gland of the body produces its own hormones and also influences the hormonal production of the other glands in the body.
- Amygdala: Regulates the heartbeat and other visceral functions and processes the emotion of fear.
- Cerebellum: Essential for coordination of movement.
- Pons: Control of breathing, circulation, heartbeat, and digestion.
- Medulla oblongata: Spinal cord.
Brain-Body Regions Impacted by Trauma

HPA Axis

Balances body following stress by releasing of various hormones/chemicals
Brain-Body Regions Impacted by Trauma

**Catecholamines:** Fight or flight response

**Cortisol:** Energy available

**Opiods:** Prevent pain

**Oxytocin:** Promotes good feelings

(Southwick et al., 2005)
Brain Regions Impacted by Trauma

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Essential for coordination of movement.

**Pituitary gland**
The master gland of the body produces its own hormones and also influences the hormonal production of the other glands in the body.

**Amygdala**
Regulates the heartbeat and other visceral functions and processes the emotion fear.

**Hippocampus**
Helps establish long-term memory in regions of the cerebral cortex.

**Spinal cord**
Control of breathing, circulation, heartbeat, and digestion.
Memory Processes Impacted by Trauma

Hippocampus processes information into memories

(Southwick et al., 2005)
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Encoding = Organizing sensory information

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Consolidation = Grouping information into memories and storing them

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**Amygdala** specializes in the processing of emotional memories (works with the hippocampus)

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Memory Processes Impacted by Trauma

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- **Encoding** = Organizing sensory information
- **Consolidation** = Grouping information into memories and storing them

**Amygdala** specializes in the processing of emotional memories (works with the hippocampus)

*Both structures are VERY sensitive to hormonal fluctuations*

(Southwick et al., 2005)
Like These . . .

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Like These . . .

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**THESE HORMONES IMPAIR MEMORY CONSOLIDATION**

(Southwick et al., 2005)
During the Assault

“This Is Your Brain On Trauma”
What Happens During A Sexual Assault

Amygdala Detects Threat → Activates Hypothalamus → HPA Axis Kicks In Hormonal Flood

SOURCE: Banks, 2002; Southwick et al., 2005
What Happens During A Sexual Assault

- Damage to memory
- Impairs rational thought

- Causes flat affect

- Reduces energy available
  Impair immune functioning

SOURCE: Banks, 2002; Southwick et al., 2005
What Happens During A Sexual Assault

Amygdala Detects Threat

Activates Hypothalamus

HPA Axis Kicks In
Hormonal Flood

Can Trigger a Complete “Shut Down” in the Body

SOURCE: Banks, 2002; Southwick et al., 2005
Tonic Immobility (TI)

- AKA: “Rape-induced paralysis”
- Autonomic (uncontrollable) mammalian response in extremely fearful situations
- Increased breathing, eye closure, paralysis
- 12-50% rape victims experience TI during assault
- TI is ~more common in victims who have been assaulted before (childhood, adolescence, or adult)

SOURCE: Fuse et al., 2007; Galiano et al., 1993; Heidt et al., 2005
Case Study: Tonic Immobility

- College house party
- 20 year-old woman
- Agreed to go back to one of the bedrooms
- Told man to stop
- He didn’t and she froze
- Lay immobile afterwards
- Men lined up on the porch to take turns raping her
Case Study: Tonic Immobility

- Victim had rape kit and filed a police report
- Police didn’t pick up rape kit (“a sloppy mess”)
- Police closed case

“She just laid there, so she must have wanted it . . . no one wants a train pulled on them, so if she laid there and took it, she must have wanted it.”
Case Study: Tonic Immobility

- Victim had rape kit and filed a police report
- Police didn’t pick up rape kit (“a sloppy mess”)
- Police closed case
- The real reason

TONIC IMMObILITY
A DOCUMENTED NEUROBIOLOGICAL CONDITION
What Happens During A Sexual Assault
What Happens During A Sexual Assault

- Increased Stress Hormones
- Impaired Functioning in Hippocampus
- Memories Fragmented

Memory Activation Can Be Unpredictable and Traumatic

SOURCE: Koss et al., 1995, 1996; Roozendaal et al., 2009; Rubin et al., 2008
What Happens During A Sexual Assault

- Increased Stress Hormones
- Impaired Functioning in Hippocampus
- Memories Fragmented
  - Memory Activation Can Be Unpredictable and Traumatic
  - Events of the Assault CAN Be Recalled Accurately

SOURCE: Koss et al., 1995, 1996; Roozendaal et al., 2009; Rubin et al., 2008
What Happens During A Sexual Assault

- Increased Stress Hormones

  - Impaired Functioning in Hippocampus

  - Memories Fragmented

    - Memory Activation Can Be Unpredictable and Traumatic

    - Events of the Assault CAN Be Recalled Accurately

BUT . . .

Alcohol use during the assault may prevent encoding, which means there’s nothing to retrieve

SOURCE: Koss et al., 1995, 1996; Roozendaal et al., 2009; Rubin et al., 2008
Case Study: Memory Fragmentation
Case Study: Memory Fragmentation

“My life was saved by a cup of coffee. I think about that a lot. That’s what saved me from going over the edge.”
Case Study: Memory Fragmentation

- 25 year-old woman
- Raped by a friend’s brother at 4th July party
- Filed police report
- Detective interview was when it all went to hell

“He wouldn’t let up, pounding me with question after question after question. Trying to trick me, trying to get me to mess up. I wanted to say, ‘hold on, give me a minute to think’. No, he kept coming at me.”
“Then I guess it was classic good-cop / bad-cop. He stormed off and another detective sat down next to me. He offered me a cup of coffee.

It’s 90 f’ing degrees outside and I’m a wreck. Coffee? OK fine. How do I take it? WHAT? Why does he care how I take my coffee?

Well, he did.

He made me coffee. He gave me a long time to just sit, collect my thoughts.
Case Study: Memory Fragmentation

“We talked it through. And I didn’t feel rattled and freaked out. I’m sure I was incoherent and he just let it roll. He was patient.

I felt like I was piecing it together, like a puzzle, we were putting together a puzzle together.

And drinking coffee.
Case Study: Memory Fragmentation

I: So, why did you do that? (give her the coffee)

R: It helps. Not the coffee so much, just the moment to let it all come together in their heads.

I: What do you mean?

R: I don’t know why it’s like that, I’ve just noticed that over the years. If you give them a few minutes to breathe . . . . it starts to make more sense. I don’t know why, it just does.
Case Study: Memory Fragmentation

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Case Study: Memory Fragmentation

I: Were you worried that if you gave her some time, she’d just make something up?

R: Nah, not really. I mean, some victims lie, but most don’t. Besides, if they’re lying, we’ll catch ‘em at it eventually. I think it’s just hard for victims to talk about and we just need to have a little patience.
Case Study: Memory Fragmentation

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MEMORY FRAGMENTATION
A DOCUMENTED NEUROBIOLOGICAL CONDITION
Take Home Lessons

Implications for Current & Cold Cases
CURRENT CASES

Assaults that occurred recently & are reported ~ 24-96 hours

COLD CASES

Assaults that occurred a long time ago, but may be re-opened due to new evidence, SAK testing, CODIS hit, etc.
... BUT from the perspective of the victim ...
Assaults that occurred a long time ago, but may be re-opened due to new evidence, SAK testing, CODIS hit, etc.
CURRENT CASES

Assaults that occurred recently & are reported ~ 24-96 hours

COLD CASES

Feeling like

Assaults that occurred a long time ago, but may be re-opened due to new evidence, SAK testing, CODIS hit, etc.
What Is Victim Notification?

- Reactivation of the assault memories
  - HPA Axis re-activation will cause neurobiological distress
  - Could trigger flashbacks and other symptoms
  - Could exacerbate PTSD and/or other MH issues
  - Could increase substance use/abuse
  - Could trigger substance abuse relapse

- A “cold case” feels like a current case
Take Home Lessons

- Neurobiological changes can lead to flat affect or “strange” emotions or emotional swings
  - “Hormonal soup”
  - Misinterpreted as being cavalier about it or lying
  - Wide range of emotions are in fact normal and it can be helpful to normalize those reactions

SOURCE: Campbell & Patterson, 2011
Take Home Lessons

- Neurobiological changes can make memory consolidation difficult
  - Story may come out fragmented or “sketchy”
  - Misinterpreted as evasiveness or lying
  - The content of the memory is accurate, just may take some time and patience for it to come together

SOURCE: Campbell & Patterson, 2011; Koss et al., 1995, 1996
Take Home Lessons

- Tonic immobility is often frightening to victims
  - Associated with increased self-blame
  - Associated with decreased likelihood of seeking help
  - Friends, family, service providers reactions to a disclosure of TI are often hurtful
  - Helpful to explain what TI is and normalize it

SOURCE: Fuse et al., 2007; Galiano et al., 1993; Heidt et al., 2005; Marx et al., 2008
Take Home Lessons

- Services for victims
  - Advocacy to buffer effects of continued contact with the legal system
  - Mental health services to address long-term mental and physical health impact
  - Substance abuse services (as needed)
  - Services that are culturally appropriate
  - Services that are developmentally appropriate

(Campbell, 2008)
Conclusions

Linking Research to Practice
Concluding Thoughts

- There are neurobiological reasons for victims’ behavior
- The criminal justice system is “a 180” from what victims need psychologically and neurologically
- Every contact is an opportunity to help . . . or hurt
This project was supported by Grant No.2011-TA-AX-K048 awarded by the Office on Violence Against Women, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, conclusions, and recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Justice, Office on Violence Against Women.